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A SCENE IN THE STAR CHAMBER.

BY MISS JEWSBURY.

In reading historical novels, one is prone to fancy that all times were better than those which happen to be passing over our heads; the "good old times," the "days of chivalry," and expressions of similar import, are familiar to our ears, and invested with the hues of poetry, are, on paper at least, dear to our imaginations. The costume of past ages seems so much more splendid, their circumstances appear more exciting, and the characters more imposing than those peculiar to our own, that we are tempted to regret our present condition. But when we read history itself, the medal is reversed. The harsh facts that imagination had either kept out of sight, or enveloped in a golden haze, stand out in their native ugliness. The splendour of a court does not, we perceive, atone for barbarism and want in the country at large; and the heroes that we fancied preux chevaliers, are too often discovered to be right noble savages. The stern old barons who have charmed us as portraits, we no longer wish to have known as originals; and we cease to envy their ladies their jewels, their galliards, or their beef-steak breakfasts. We acquire a lively sense of the superiority of carpets over strewn rushes; of beds with sheets over beds without; of carriages over palfreys and saddles and even pillions; of libraries of useful knowledge over manuscript legends of fabulous saints. We begin to apprehend, moreover, that bravery may be attired in scarlet broadcloth as well as in armour, plate or chain; that wisdom may exist in the head of him who shaves every day instead of wearing a beard down to his girdle; and that if necessitated to lose a limb, one would prefer a modern surgeon to an ancient amputator who cauterized with boiling pitch!

The perusal of political history imparts a strong impression of the greater comfort of living when laws, like a lady's drawers, have been somewhat "set to rights," than when a man might lose his head before he precisely knew why, and his property without the pleasure of knowing its destination. Yes, it is the privilege of faithful history to excite gratitude—on behalf of the great men who lived in stormy days, and in rude or semi-civilized ages struggled with their own ignorance and that of their contemporaries,—but never envy. Query: any delicate lady like to exchange her musical soiree to join queen Elizabeth at the Bear Gardens? Would any lord chancellor like to enact one of Wolsey's three hours' kneeling to his king? Does any court favourite desire the duke of Buckingham's honours, remembering Felton's stab over the shoulder? What modern Mr. Pym would relish having to return thanks on behalf of the House of Commons to a company of tradesmen's wives who had sent up a petition? What modern offender would

like to take a turn or two on the rack prior to being hanged? Does any patriot sigh to be enabled to give emphasis to the line "friends, countrymen, lend me your ears," by having his own cut off? Does any council-board long for the power of so capacitating him? Lastly, do good men of any denomination wish they had existed in those good old times when the "sword of the spirit" meant an Andrew Ferrara, when the pulpits echoed with railing, and "Judah vexed Ephraim, and Ephraim envied Judah?" Or did the golden age lie in those remoter periods when no truth was discussed, because *all* truth was hid in darkness, and the whole duty of man lay in believing a lie, or supporting a fraud? "Let us justly appreciate the real benefits our ancestors possessed at their due value, and we shall find ourselves very unwilling to exchange ours for those of Henry VIII., the dungeon and the block; for those of Mary with the rack and the faggot; for those of the heroic and splendid Elizabeth with all her talents; for the James's or the Charles's; or the remoter eras of seignorage, vassalage, of intestine broils, maddening factions, desolation, and civil war."

Will the good-natured reader, then, who may happen to agree with the writer in preferring times present to times past, yield an occasional ten minutes to an occasional sketch, illustrative of various eras in English history? Presuming that the said good-natured reader has given his consent, proceed we now to a scene in the star-chamber in the time of Charles I.

"Well, Mr. Attorney-General," said the earl of Dorset, "well, Mr. Attorney-General, having taken minutes for a decree forbidding the vintners to dress victuals in their houses, till such time as they shall submit to the new tax on their retailed wines, what further remaineth for the to-morrow's occupation? It wearied, methinks, towards noon."

"Would your lordship that the council heard the certificates of all and sundry who have enlarged the city of London, contrary to the late proclamation? Or there are the informations against divers persons of quality for preferring to reside in town when it is his majesty's pleasure that they should away to their several counties."

"Pray, Mr. Attorney-General, craving the license of interrupting you, what may be this plea of Sheffield, the recorder of Salisbury?"

"Marry, my lord, it is a plea why money should not chink in his majesty's exchequer;—the man hath contumaciously taken down the church windows, painted with holy mysteries, and hath replaced the same with plain glass, for the which he hath been most justly fined. But I pray you let us despatch the case of that notorious evil-minded, stiff-necked spirit, William

Prynn; he hath long waited for judgment, and I have here abundant evidence."

"Spare us Histrio Mastix at this late hour, Mr. Attorney," said a speaker from the lower end of the board; "'Histrio Mastix, or a scourge for the stage-players,' would have served Goliath instead of his shield; besides, how know you but even a few passages from that book-mountain may so convince us all of the iniquity of stage plays, that our brethren of the inns of court may run restiff; and, to save their pockets, lay claim to a conscience, and drop the masque they have at our instance offered to their majesties?"*

"Never mistrust them, my good Sir Edward; and, if you will dine with me after council this day, you shall hear sundry of the masque committee report progress; a rare show will it be, Sir Edward, not unworthy of our body, or of their majesties' presence!"

"I do beseech ye, then, let us have this pestilent fellow brought in, and make an end; and, as he hath wrought a whip for others, so let us whip the whipper," said the president.

"Amen," said all the lords present; and Mr. Prynn was commanded to be brought before the board on the morrow, to be tried for having put forth a book called *Histrio Mastix*, being a collection of all the passages against theatrical performances that he had found in the fathers, and other grave authors, together with his own prolix remarks thereon; the whole making a light elegant folio of a thousand pages, singularly offensive to the court, where masques and mummings, drolls and dancings, were greatly in request.

Looking back at this time of day upon the whole affair, surprise and a sense of the ludicrous mingle with the graver feelings excited by the result of the prosecution. Prynn was an arrogant bigot, who wrote a book in barbarous taste; moreover, he loved neither the power nor the trappings of royalty; indulged himself in unseemly invectives, and manifested altogether a most unmanageable temper. But Prynn was a brave and conscientious bigot, and his honest endeavours, in after-life, to save king Charles from the block, should, though it was late and unavailing, be admitted as evidence in his favour. Remembering, too, the savage treatment he had experienced at the hands of Charles's ministers, his conduct deserves to be called generous; for he wrote on the king's behalf when so to write involved personal risk. This, however, is a digression from the star-chamber and that fearful folio, *Histrio Mastix*.

On the morrow, the awful court being assembled in full number, the offender, William Prynn, barrister at law, was brought up from the tower, where, for twelve months, he had been incarcerated, to be tried, judged, and condemned; standing the whole time behind lord chief justice Richardson and archbishop Neale. Great was the outward contrast between the prisoner and his judges: between the meanly-attired, dis-

graced, prison-worn, yet fiery-hearted puritan, and those whom he considered "silk and satin divines," and courtiers "purple with pride." Yet he stood before them all with as strong and soul-felt a conviction that God was on his side as could be felt by the king upon the throne, or by that somewhat kindred spirit engaged on the opposite cause—archbishop Laud himself. From the thousand pages that poor Prynn had put together, "drawing all things to one," church ceremonies and libels on the court; music and hair-dressing; doctrines and diversions; bishops and bonfires; queens and coifs; Mr. Attorney-General found no difficulty in selecting many hard sayings. "Hear ye," cried the crown lawyer, who seems to have had an ear for music, "hear what charitable terms he bestoweth on church melody, calling it not a noise of men, but rather a bleating of brutes, wherein choristers bellow the tenor amongst them like oxen—bark a counter point like a kennel of dogs—roar a chorus like a sort of bulls—and grunt out a bass as if it were a number of pigs! All stage-players he terms them rogues, in which he doth falsify the very act of parliament, for unless they go abroad they are not rogues. The same term he giveth unto scholars' acting. Mr. Prynn had a purpose in this to infuse it into men's minds that we are now running into Paganism and Gentilism. He falleth upon those things that have not relation to stage plays. He falleth upon hunting, public festivals, Christmas-keeping, May-poles, the dressing up a house with green ivy, yea, perukes do offend him. Then for the time of compiling this book, seven years ago it was compiled, and is since then grown seven times bigger and seven times worse. If then, may it please your lordships, he hath fallen foul upon all things, all persons, all sexes, the king's magistrates, the king's household, and even the king himself. He taketh upon him to teach a remedy, but the remedy is worse than the disease!" Then Mr. Attorney-General called for divers passages, scandalous to the king and government, to be read from Mr. Prynn's book; and after that arose his counsel to endeavour to defend him, who was condemned already. The speeches of that counsel were interesting endeavours to shield their client without compromising their own credit; never did truth in a court of justice assume so lamb-like a part, or speak with such a faltering tongue. Not a word beyond apology for the prisoner; and praise only short of adulation of the marvellous ability of the king's counsel; and a unanimous casting of their cause under the honourable feet gathered under the council board!

That cause being heard and sifted, but not in one day, nor yet in two, the lords sat themselves down to pass sentence on Mr. Prynn. And first spoke the lord Cottington, chancellor of the exchequer; he cited first matter of an objectionable nature, how Mr. Prynn had in his book called our English ladies shorn and frizzled, how he liked not music, nor dancing, nor hawking, the love of which recreations he considered a cause of the untimely end of many princes—"my

* The masque here alluded to, and which was actually given, cost the learned revellers twenty-one thousand pounds.

lords," wound up the chancellor, "shall not all that hear these things, think that it is the mercy of the king that Mr. Prynne is not cut off? This book is in print, it tendeth to bring magistrates into dislike with the people, and yet, my lords, it pleaseth his majesty to let the writer have a trial here! If it do agree with the court, I do adjudge Mr. Prynne to have his book burned by the hangman. I do adjudge Mr. Prynne to be put from the bar. I do condemn Mr. Prynne to stand in the pillory and lose both his ears; and lastly, I do condemn him in 75,000 fine to the king, and perpetual imprisonment." A trifling nota bene, that!

The next, in course, who spoke, was the lord chief justice Richardson.

"We are troubled here with a book, a monster (*monstrum horrendum, informe ingens*!).—For the book I do hold it a most scandalous, infamous libel to the king's majesty, a most pious and religious king; to the queen's majesty, a most excellent and gracious queen. I protest unto your lordships it maketh my heart to swell, and my blood in my veins to boil, (so cold as I am,) to see this or any thing attempted which may endanger my gracious sovereign. It is to me the greatest comfort in the world to behold his prosperity.—Not to hold your lordships any longer, my lords, it is a most wicked, infamous, scandalous, and seditious libel. Mr. Prynne, I must now come to my sentence, wherein I agree with my lord Cottington as he began very well—the burning the book and putting its author from the profession of the bar. And for the pillory I hold it just and equal; so do I agree too to the 5000*l.* fine; and perpetual imprisonment I do think fit for him, and to be restrained from writing, neither to have pen, ink, nor paper; yet let him have some pretty prayer book to pray to God to forgive him his sins."

Then spake the earl of Dorset, the queen's chamberlain; and as his speech was twice as long as that made by any of his associates, so was it more thickly strewn with the roses of court flattery, and the thistles of reproach against the prisoner. "If any," said the lord chamberlain, "casts aspersions on his majesty's dear consort, our royal queen, and my gracious mistress, silence would prove impiety in me that do daily contemplate her virtues. Were all such saints as she, I think the Roman church were not to be condemned; the candour of her life is a more powerful motive than all precepts; no hand of fortune or of power can hurt her; her heart is full of honour; majesty, mildness, and meekness are married in her soul; and so, when I have said all in her praise, I can never say enough of her excellency, in the relation whereon an orator nor a poet lie. Mr. Prynne, your iniquity is full, it runs over—it is not Mr. Attorney that calls for judgment against you, but it is all mankind.—Mr. Prynne, I do declare you to be a schism-maker, a sedition-sower, a wolf in sheep's clothing; in a word, *omnium malorum nequissimus*. I shall fine him ten thousand pounds. I will no more set him at liberty than a mad dog. He is

not a sociable soul—he is not a rational soul—he is fit to live in dens with beasts of prey like himself. Therefore I do condemn him to perpetual imprisonment. Now for corporal punishment, whether should I burn him in the forehead, or slit him in the nose? I should be loth he should escape with his ears, for he may get a perriwig, which he now so much inveighs against, and so hide them, or force his conscience to make use of his unlovely love-locks on both sides. Therefore I would have his ears cropped too."

And, in the course of a few days, that part of the sentence which related to the bodily butchery, was carried into effect; but, with so little converting influence upon Prynne's opinions, that we find him, about three years afterwards, brought before the star chamber to receive sentence for fresh libels, fashioned during his abode in prison. The second sentence added branding to cutting his ears yet closer to the cheek. Good old times!